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WASHINGTON TODAY: WAS VITALY ONCE A HAPPY DEFECTOR? NYET!

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WASHINGTON

Of all Vitaly Yurchenko's complaints _ the alleged kidnapping, the drugs, the torture, being forced to have dinner with Bill Casey _ none was more surprising than that the CIA couldn't seem to find anyone with whom he could speak Russian.

It was right at the top of his list of the terrible things that he said were done to him, the first thing he mentioned at his extraordinary news conference at the Soviet Embassy.

"I'd like to tell you during these three horrible months for you I didn't have any chance to speak Russian," he said. "I was explained that they say there is a shortage of Russian-speaking translators."

People involved in the effort to untangle the strange affair of the Soviet intelligence official, and whether he was or wasn't a genuine defector, deny that complaint.

Certainly few people in official Washington believed Yurchenko's tale of being kidnapped, drugged and held against his will. But there was widespread questioning about how the CIA handled the case, with some critics accusing the agency of insensitivity.

The agency's effort to refute Yurchenko's complaint that he had no one with whom he could speak Russian might be characterized as a semantic denial, just as Yurchenko's complaint was something of an exaggeration. Of course, the CIA has people who speak Russian, speak it every bit as well as Yurchenko speaks English.

In this case, that wasn't good enough and it points up a disturbing aspect of the affair. The CIA came across as being far better with satellites than with people. It can photograph Mikhail Gorbachev's backyard barbecue from a satellite hundreds of miles in space and tell whether he served hot dogs or hamburgers and whether with mustard or ketchup.

But when agents have the guy they believed was No. 5 in the KGB, did they understand he needed more than someone who can translate Pravda?

Was this a case, if you believe Yurchenko's complaint, where the CIA failed to understand the Soviet needed a friend, someone who spoke his language, to whom he could unload his hopes and fears? He needed someone who spoke what retired CIA official Donald Jameson calls "good, easy Russian."

"The number of really good Russian speakers at the agency is fewer than it was," said Jameson, who was involved in handling Soviet defectors during his career.

"It may well have been the case," added Jameson "that there weren't enough people to conduct his debriefing in good, easy Russian and that, of course, poses a psychological problem that could have been avoided."

Earlier defectors have spoken of the psychological problem.

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E. Alexandra Costa, who defected in 1977, went to the FBI and volunteered to talk to Yurchenko as one defector to another. She said the FBI thought it was a good idea but the CIA never responded to her suggestion.

"The kind of bond and rapport that should have been made between Yurchenko and somebody wasn't made," said Jameson. "Maybe the root problem in the whole case is the people who were handling him saw it as a question of paper shuffling rather than dealing with human beings."

The impression is that CIA debriefers work from a spy manual that tells them in paragraphs labeled, A, B, C, and D, just how to handle East bloc bigshot defectors.

Paragraph A would instruct the spy handlers to put the defector in a safe house out in the Virginia countryside, preferably a place with a swimming pool and a tennis court.

Paragraph B might suggest an intimate dinner with CIA director William J. Casey in his private diningroom at the agency headquarters in Langley, Va. Yurchenko's version of that evening was that he was drugged and didn't recognize Casey.

Another paragraph could have recommended taking a defector out to dinner at a French restaurant in the capital's chic Georgetown section. The spy handlers had reached that stage when Yurchenko pushed back his chair and took a walk.

Unfortunately, if there were such a manual it would have been written before the Soviets moved into their new embassy _ just a 10-minute walk from the restaurant.

EDITOR'S NOTE _ Donald M. Rothberg is the chief political writer of The Associated Press.